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Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

REVIEW BY MEREDITH L. ROMAN, SUNY BROCKPORT

Douglas Selvage's in-depth exploration of the role that the Soviet Committee on State Security (KGB) and the East German Ministry for State Security (Stasi) and its Main Directorate for Intelligence (HVA) played in spreading disinformation about the origins of the HIV virus that causes AIDS is particularly timely. The global COVID-19 pandemic has inspired conspiracy theories and disinformation efforts that are not based on scientific evidence but on racial prejudices in the case of the Trump White House, and, with regard to President Vladimir Putin's Kremlin, a history inherited from its Soviet predecessor of identifying the CIA as an evil mastermind of infectious diseases. Selvage's impressive research yields a detailed, multi-layered analysis of the ways in which different actors with varying objectives invested in the narrative that the U.S. government created the HIV virus as part of its bioweapons research program for its potential use in a future war or against despised groups domestically and internationally. "Operation 'Denver'" is the first installment in a two-part essay project that draws partly on a monograph Selvage co-published in the German language in 2014 with historian Christopher Nehring.¹ In this article, Selvage contends that the Stasi and HVA played an auxiliary role in the 1985-1986 efforts of the KGB to spread disinformation about AIDS, but assumed a more prominent role in the campaign by 1987 – the evidence of which he will outline in a future essay.

Selvage is partly motivated in his research to dispute the claims of individuals like Werner Grossmann, who assumed leadership of the HVA in 1986 and insists (unlike his predecessor Markus Wolf) that the HVA did not contribute to the disinformation campaign. Grossman and former officers who deny the HVA's participation are aided by the fact that they succeeded in destroying roughly 90 percent of their records immediately after the collapse of the German Democratic Republic in 1989 (76, 108). Selvage furthermore disputes the assertions of Erhard Geissler, a biological weapons specialist, who interprets the absence of evidence in the Stasi archives as evidence of the HVA's lack of involvement in the KGB's AIDS disinformation campaign (77, 107). As Selvage argues, information culled from Bulgarian, Czechoslovak, and East German State Security archives demonstrate that HVA's disinformation division (HVA/X) as well as its Sector for Science and Technology (HVA/SWT) participated in the KGB's efforts to spread false information about the origins of the AIDS virus, thus prioritizing foreign policy objectives over scientific evidence.

Selvage situates the KGB's launching of its AIDS disinformation campaign amidst a heightened sense of urgency on the part of Soviet leaders to represent the new General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev as an agent of peace and the antithesis of the bellicose, antagonistic U.S. President Ronald Reagan who had entered his second term in office. At the same time, Selvage establishes that the KGB did not originate the "HIV-as-U.S.-bioweapon thesis" as some have claimed (79). Instead, the Soviet intelligence agency appropriated it from the accusations circulating in gay American communities in the first half of

¹ Douglas Selvage and Christopher Nehring, *AIDS-Verschworung: Das Ministerium für Staatssicherheit und die AIDS-Desinformationskampagne des KGB* (Berlin: BStU, 2014).

1983. Although the KGB orchestrated the publication in July 1983 of an article titled “AIDS May Invade India: Mystery Disease Caused by U.S. Experiments” in *Patriot*, an Indian newspaper that had a history of printing KGB disinformation, it was not until October 1985 that Soviet intelligence leaders decided to pursue a global AIDS disinformation campaign.²

The KGB’s innovation in the HIV as U.S. bioweapon thesis was identifying a specific location where U.S. authorities had allegedly weaponized HIV, namely at the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases at Fort Detrick, Maryland. The Fort Detrick thesis, as Selvage calls it, was first publically articulated in an article that appeared in the Soviet newspaper *Literaturnaia gazeta* (Literary newspaper) on 30 October 1985.³ KGB officials initially expressed frustration with U.S. journalists’ lack of response to the thesis and hence alleged in a subsequent article in *Literaturnaia gazeta* on 13 November 1985 that when leaders in Washington, DC ordered the American “free” press to silence a story, then it dutifully obeyed especially if it pertained to the affairs of the CIA or Pentagon (84).⁴ By the end of 1985, the KGB altered the Fort Detrick thesis – appropriating a claim of anti-Soviet conspiracy theorists in the United States and United Kingdom – to contend that rather than just combining viruses in order to weaponize them, U.S. research scientists had genetically engineered the AIDS virus thus tapping into a potential cache of supporters who opposed that form of research.

Selvage identifies two major turning points in the KGB’s AIDS disinformation campaign. The first occurred in August–September 1986 when both before and during a conference of the Non-Aligned Movement in Harare, Zimbabwe the research of Jakob and Lilli Segal, two East German scientists (with French and Soviet citizenship) titled “AIDS: Its Nature and Origin” was published in the brochure *AIDS: USA Home-Made Evil, NOT out of AFRICA* (95).⁵ Bulgarian archives indicate that HVA/X (in addition to the KGB) was involved in the production and dissemination of the Harare brochure. Indeed, Selvage demonstrates that in July 1986 the HVA/X had launched Operation “Denver” rather than Operation “INFEKTION” as a former HVA official alleged which ultimately included the promise to Bulgarian security officials (made in September 1986) to provide them with scientific research that would demonstrate that AIDS was created in the United States rather than in Africa, and that this information would illuminate the threat of biological warfare, foster anti-American sentiment abroad, and incite political tensions in the United States (103).

Selvage concedes that the precise nature of Segals’ relationship with the KGB and Stasi is not entirely certain. He insists, however that contrary to the allegations of one former HVA official, archival materials in Sofia and Berlin do not show that Jakob Segal was simply a stooge of the Stasi. While Segal was likely inspired to conduct his research by the aforementioned articles in the *Patriot* and *Literaturnaia gazeta*, Selvage argues that the evidence points to Segal embarking on his research with his wife Lilli without much intervention on the part of the Stasi. To this end, Selvage emphasizes Segal’s agency and his desire to help the KGB and Stasi to discredit Western “imperialists” (122). He adds that even if Jakob Segal had connections with the KGB that does not mean that his findings were inconsistent with his own convictions. Additionally, while the HVA/SWT may have given Segal some advice concerning his research, there is no evidence that Segal followed it. Regardless of the nature of KGB or Stasi influence, the arguments of Jakob and Lilli Segal significantly advanced the disinformation campaign. Their use of scientific language lent respectability to the Fort Detrick thesis, resolved some of its inconsistencies, and helped fulfill the campaign’s objective of increasing anti-American sentiment on the African continent (111). Indeed, many African leaders, journalists and researchers who rejected as racist theories of the HIV virus’s natural origins on the African continent enthusiastically embraced the Segals’ work.

² “AIDS May Invade India: Mystery Disease Caused by US Experiments,” *Patriot*, 17 July 1983, 1.

³ Valentin Zapevalov, “Panika na zapade, ili shto skryvaetsia za sensatsei vokrug AIDS,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 30 October 1985, 14.

⁴ “Pochemu molchit pressa SShA,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 13 November 1985, 2.

⁵ *AIDS: USA Home-Made Evil, NOT out of AFRICA*, 2nd rev. ed. (n.p.: n.pub., 1986).

The other important turning point, which Selva identifies as a major tactical victory for the KGB, occurred the following month when the *Sunday Express*, a London paper published the Segals' version of the Fort Detrick thesis in an article ("AIDS 'Made in Lab' Shock") on 26 October 1986.⁶ Thereafter, the Segals's claims were reprinted in newspapers worldwide. HVA officials facilitated journalists' communication with the Segals after the publication of the *Sunday Express* article, and assisted the KGB by documenting Western responses to the disinformation campaign. The fact that the ideas of the Segals's enhanced Fort Detrick thesis began to spread on their own by so-called multipliers, namely those who did not know that they helped the KGB or Stasi by spreading it, constituted the main tactical goal of Soviet-bloc disinformation campaigns.

Selva identifies several factual errors in the Segals's study and conjectures that at least one individual involved in this vast U.S. conspiracy would have disclosed the secret (112-3). Selva furthermore notes that it was not just Western scientists who had issues with the Segals's research. The KGB and Stasi were unable to enlist the help of Soviet and East German scientists to publicly support the Segals's findings (114). Despite the real problems with the Segals's enhanced Fort Detrick conspiracy theory, Selva argues that a series of factors converged to give the HIV as U.S. bioweapons thesis currency (and continued currency) among some Americans. These include the scientific debates about the origins of AIDS, the absence of effective medical treatment, President Reagan's seemingly indifferent and belated response to the epidemic, and the exposure in the 1970s of the U.S. government's involvement in the Tuskegee experiment and the CIA's study of mind-altering drugs (120). Altogether Selva's arguments imply that the KGB's AIDS disinformation campaign would not have been successful had U.S. leaders, who ruled over the world's most technologically advanced national security state, not fostered the perception that they cared little for protecting the lives of gay Americans and Black people as a whole whether in the United States or on the African continent.

Meredith L. Roman is an Associate Professor of History at SUNY Brockport, and the author of *Opposing Jim Crow: African Americans and the Soviet Indictment of U.S. Racism, 1928-1937*.

⁶ Alfred Lee, "AIDS 'Made in Lab' Shock," *Sunday Express*, 26 October 1986, 1-2.